

ANGELOS SIKELIANOS AND THE BALKAN IDEA:  
A FORGOTTEN RESPONSE

The Institute for Balkan Studies was founded in 1953 for the noble purpose of fostering mutual understanding, friendship and co-operation between the peoples of the Balkan Peninsula. This was by no means a new idea; we could perhaps trace it as far back as the end of the 18th century in the call of Rigas Velestinlis for a confederation of Balkan States<sup>1</sup>. Some 120 years later—thirty years before the foundation of Thessaloniki's Institute for Balkan Studies—the poet Angelos Sikelianos earnestly advocated a similar cause under circumstances none the less dangerous for Greece as they were difficult for Sikelianos himself. Whether from prophetic insight, humanitarian courage or political naïveté, he had in the months before the Asia Minor disaster of 1922 addressed an outspoken open letter to King Constantine I declaring the national necessity for «our cordial and honourable unity with our enemies»<sup>2</sup>. Throughout the tragic events that followed his stance remained essentially the same, although his voice acquired a new tone of urgency. He threw himself into a series of lectures aimed at a national spiritual regeneration<sup>3</sup>, and when the Balkan Idea was proposed to him anew he responded without hesitation: «The Balkan Idea represents one of the prime regenerative values . . . equal to the task of keeping Greece vigilant at the helm amid the tempestuous cross-currents of our time».

Sikelianos' words came in the wake of the Asia Minor catastrophe, which he saw not as an isolated tragedy but as the culminating failure of an ideology that had led Greece into four wars against her neighbours in less than ten years, whilst internally the nation had all but torn itself apart with its own hands; he saw Greece broken in body and spirit, politically, ideologically and economically bankrupt, writhing in the pangs of death or—as he himself believed with his whole being—of a rebirth.

Characteristically viewing the problem in dramatic, cosmic dimensions,

1. Cf. A. Vacalopoulos, *Ἱστορία τοῦ Νέου Ἑλληνισμοῦ, Δ', Τουρκοκρατία 1669-1812*, Thessaloniki 1973, p. 596 ff.

2. Cf. Takis Dimopoulos, «Ὁ Σικελιανὸς στὸν διχασμὸ καὶ στὴν Κατοχή», *Νέα Ἑστία*, τόμ. 96, τεύχ. 1130 (1 August 1974), p. 1218 ff.

3. Cf. *Λεύκωμα* for Angelos Sikelianos, *Ἑταιρεία Λευκαδιτικῶν Μελετῶν*, edited by Gerasimos Grigoris, Athens 1971, p. 29.

he realized that either human history was about to share the fate of certain places that have disappeared back into the primeval jungle, or that a new spring would bloom all over the earth<sup>1</sup>. In the apparent chaos of those years he detected the prelude to a new universal creative harmony of all mankind, and he devoted his gigantic energies to the duty, as he felt it, of tuning others in to this world harmony and swelling it to full diapason. By virtue of its integrated pre-Christian and Christian culture, Greece was destined to make an inestimable contribution, and the Balkan Idea — because of the deeper values that it enshrined at that point in time and place— constituted not simply a «good idea» but a matter of vital necessity if the renaissance he envisaged was not to be aborted.

Sikelianos was not the only voice proclaiming closer co-operation between the Balkan States. The forum was provided by the Athenian periodical *Ἡ Νέα Πολιτική*, founded and directed by Kostas Tournakis whose writings and correspondence reveal a deep spiritual affinity with the poet (he later proved an invaluable colleague in the famous Delphic movement)<sup>2</sup>. Editorial policy was non-party nationalist, as several trenchant leaders deploring the «pro-Venizelist anti-Venizelist vicious circle» of contemporary politics made clear. Among the most frequent contributors were Kleon Paraschos, G. V. Pamboukas, A. Saounatsou, Linos Karzis, G. Brasibanopoulos, I. K. and P. Kanellopoulos, and I. Notaras, while the shadow of Ion Dragoumis falls clearly across many of its pages.

The edition of 15 June 1923 announced that the journal would host discussion on the Idea of Balkan *rapprochement*, and declared that «members of the government, party leaders and other significant figures . . . the diplomats, the most illustrious scholars and specialists, journalists, authors, artists and other intellectuals of all the Balkan countries» would put forward their views. In spite of this claim it is apparent from the list of those who had indicated their willingness to contribute that the so-called «united opposition» of 1920 would be disproportionately represented in the discussion. The roll-call is nevertheless impressive; it includes the ambassadors of the South Slav State, Bulgaria, and Albania; the Minister for the Interior G. Papandreou and a number of former ministers (Demertzis, Eutaxias, Kafandaris, Mercouris, Papanastasiou, Tsaldaris); two party-leaders (I. Metaxas, G. Rallis) and representatives of several others including the Rural and Communist parties;

1. «Ὁμιλίες μου στους Ἀρίστους Α΄», *Νέα Πολιτική* 13 (15 July 1923), p. 311.

2. See *Νέα Πολιτική* (1923), pp. 19-22, 111-113 etc.; B' series 1 (1937), pp. 137-140 etc.; Dimitris E. Tournakis, «Ἀνέκδοτα γράμματα τοῦ ζεύγους Σικελιανοῦ», *Νέα Ἑστία*, τ. 95, τεύχ. 1118 (1 February 1974), pp. 159-162.

the newspaper directors Vlachos and Nikoloudis; the brother of Ion Dragoumis, Philip; university professors, former top civil servants, etc.<sup>1</sup> Sikelianos' contribution consisted of his «Ὁμιλίες μου στοὺς Ἀρίστους»<sup>2</sup>, which were introduced by the following covering note:

ΣΥΝΟΠΤΙΚΗ ΑΠΑΝΤΗΣΗ  
ΓΙΑ ΤΗ ΒΑΛΚΑΝΙΚΗΝ ΙΔΕΑ

Σὲ κάθε νέα φάση τῆς ζωῆς τῶν λαῶν, τὰ προάγγελα συμπτώματα εἶναι τόσα, ὥστε πρὶν ἢ λάμψη τῆς ὁλόκληρης Ἰδέας ὅπου μέλλει νὰ τὴν ἐνσαρκώσῃ, καταυγάσῃ τὸ ρυθμὸ τῶν προσπαθειῶν ἐνὸς συνόλου, ἢ διὰθλασῇ ποὺ ὑφίσταται ἢ βραδεῖα ἀνατολὴ τῆς, μὲς στὸ πνεῦμα τῶν περισσότερων ἀνθρώπων, ἀπατᾷ ὡς πρὸς τὶς ἀρχὲς τῆς δυνάμεις τῆς καὶ τὴν ἐμφανίζει στὸν ἑαυτὸν τοὺς σὰν μιὰ κάποιον οὐτοπικὴ ἀντανάκλαση μονάχα τῶν μοιραίων ἐναλλαγῶν τῆς Ἱστορίας. Ἡ διαβάθμιση τοῦ ψυχικοῦ ἡθικοῦ διανοητικοῦ ἐπιπέδου τῶν ἀτόμων, δημιουργεῖ ὥστόσο ὡς πρὸς τὴν βαθύτερη ἐκτίμηση αὐτῶν τῶν συμπτωμάτων διαφορὲς τεράστιες, ὥστε κάποιον ἀκολουθώντας τα στήν πρώτη ἐμφάνισή τους, ν' ἀγκαλιάζουν τὸν ὀρίζοντα ποὺ μέλλει νὰ φωτίσῃ ἢ Ἰδέα μεσουρανώντας, ἐνῶ ἄλλοι ποὺ διαισθάνονται πῶς κάτι εἴτε ἀλλάζει εἴτε θ' ἀλλάξῃ ὁλόγυρά τους, περιμένουν τὴν ἐπέμβαση τοῦ χρόνου, γιὰ νὰ στρέψουν φανερά τὴν προσοχή του στῆς Ἰδέας τὴν αὐτοδύναμην αἰτία.

Ἡ Ἰδέα στῆς ὁποίας τὴν ἔρευνα

SYNOPTIC RESPONSE  
TO THE BALKAN IDEA

The indications that herald each new phase in the life of nations are so many that, before the radiance of the total Idea which it is about to incarnate can illuminate the harmony in the efforts of any group as a whole, the refraction which its slow rise incurs within the spirits of most men misleads them with regard to the sources of its power and makes it appear to them merely as a sort of utopian reflection of History's inevitable alternations.

Gradations of psychic, moral and intellectual levels in individuals nevertheless create enormous differences in their deepest evaluation of these signs, so that some who follow them as they first emerge embrace the horizons which the Idea will illuminate as it reaches its zenith, while others who sense that things around them are either changing or will change await the intervention of time before turning their attention openly to the axiomatic cause underlying the Idea.

Certainly, the Idea which *Ἡ Νέα Πολιτικὴ* now invites us to explore did not arise just yesterday —in-

1. See *Νέα Πολιτικὴ* 13 (15 July 1923), p. 289.

2. *Νέα Πολιτικὴ* 13, 14 & 16 (1923), pp. 310-312, 331-333 & 380-382.

μᾶς προσκαλεῖ αὐτὴν τὴν ὥρα ἡ Νέα Πολιτικὴ δὲν εἶναι βέβαια χθесινὴ — ἀμέτρητα συμπτώματα τὴν προαναγγείλαν — καὶ οἱ κύριοι ποῦ προκάλεσαν τὴν ἔρευνά της, ἀγκαλιάσαν δίχως ἄλλο, τὸν βαθὺν ὀρίζοντά της, ἀπὸ χρόνια στήν ψυχὴ τους καθαρὰ. Ἀλλ' ὁ σφαλερὸς τροχὸς μὲ τὸν ὁποῖον *συνοδοιῶνταν* ἡ ζωὴ μας μὲ τὴν σύγχρονη παγκόσμια Ἱστορία καὶ τοὺς λαοὺς ποὺ γειτονεύουν τὴν Ἑλλάδα ὤφειλε νὰ συντριφεῖ στὸν ἄξονά του καὶ νὰ τὴν ἐκτροχιάσει ὁλόκληρη σὲ μιὰ ὥρα, γιὰ νὰ βγοῦνε οἱ ἐκλεκτοὶ πρὸς τοὺς πολλοὺς καὶ νὰ ὑποδείξουν τὴν ἰδέα τῆς φυσικῆς της καὶ ἀπαραίτητης τροχιάς.

Ἄς τοὺς ἀρκέσει ὥστὸσο ἡ φοβερὴ καὶ κρίσιμη ὥρα τούτη, θὰ τὴν εὗρουν τάχα εὐνοϊκότερη ποτέ; Ἄς τοὺς ἀρκέσει ἡ ὥρα τούτη ὅπου τὰ προβλήματα τῶν λαῶν εἶναι βαλμένα στὸ καθολικὸ καὶ φυσικὸν ἐπίπεδό τους, ποῦ ἡ ψυχὴ τοῦ κόσμου (τὸ αἰσθάνονται πλέον ὅλοι), εἶναι ἀδύνατον νὰ κινιθεῖ σ' ἓνα σκοπὸ διευθυνόμενο ἀπ' τὰ ἔξω, ποῦ εἶν' ἀδύνατο στὸ βάθος νὰ ὑποκύψει στὴν νεκρὴν ἱστορικὴ αἰτιολογία, ὅπου ἀκόμα προσπαθοῦνε νὰ τὴν θάψουν, μὲ τὰ ἐρείπια τοῦ δικοῦ τους ναυαγίου, οἱ χθесινοὶ της, ὅπου ἐπέζησαν φονεῖς. Ἄς ἀρκεσθοῦνε στὴν στιγμὴν ἐτούτη, ὅπου ἡ ἱστορία ἀρχίζει πιά νὰ μπένει τραγικὴ ἀλλὰ ψυχικότερη ἀρμονία, στὴν συνείδηση ὁλόκληρου τοῦ κόσμου, αἰσθητὴ ἀπ' τὰ πανάρχαια στρώματά της, ἀκου-

numerable indications heralded it—and there can be no doubt that the gentlemen initiating its investigation have for years embraced in their souls its deep horizons clearly. But the eccentric wheel with which our life *meshed* with contemporary world history and with the peoples that border Greece needed to shatter on its axis and in a moment derail this life completely, in order that the elect go forth to the many and demonstrate the idea of its natural and necessary course.

Though the present hour be one of terrible crisis, may it suffice for them: will they ever find one more favourable? Let them be content with this hour when the nations' problems have been set on their universal, natural plane; the plane where the world's soul (as everyone is now aware) cannot stir towards a goal governed from without, where it is impossible deep down for it to succumb to the dead historical causality with which the survivors amongst those who were yesterday its murderers are still trying to bury it under the rubble of their own shipwreck.

Let them be content with this moment when history is at last beginning to instil a tragic but deeply psychic harmony into the consciousness of the whole world; its most archaic levels are perceptible, its clearest commands audible to those nations or individuals who, *broadening the domain of responsi-*

στη στίς πιό καθάριες έντολές της, από κείνους, λαούς ή άτομα, ποῦ πάσχουν, ό καθένas μές στο στίβο του και για όλους, άνευρύοντας τó χῶρο τής εὐθύνης, να δεχθόνε τή μεγάλη περίσσειά της, όχι πλέον ὡς να διχάζονται βαθιά τους, οί αἰτίες τής ὕψωσής τους ή έκπτωσής τους, ἀλλά ὡς όλες να συντρέχουν, να ένωθόνε, στη βαθύτερη ήθική τους άντοχή. Οί στιγμές, που οί λαοί ὡς σήμερα ένωνόντανε ή συγκέντρωναν τó πρόβλημα τής ζωής τους στον έαυτό τους, ήταν σπανιότατες, σπρωγμένες σχεδόν πάντα από μιá άμυνα παροδική ή έντοπισμένη άσφυκτικά στα διάφορα σημεία του κόσμου.

“Ας άδραχτοῦμε άπ’ τήν στιγμήν έτούτη, που ή έλευθερία πέρνει για όλους τους άνθρώπους κάποιον άνεπάντεχα πλατύτερο όρισμό της, κ’ ή άτμόσφαιρά της στη συνείδηση των λίγων έφωτίσθη πλέον ὡς άμεσα, παγκόσμια και άνώτατα ήθική. “Η ζωή των λαών δέν μπορεί πλέον να εἶνε τó κτηνῶδες γεγονός μέσα στο όποιο ή Πολιτική τόσων αἰώνων έπεδίωξε να τó περικλείσει. “Η βαλκανική ιδέα άντιπροσωπεύει για τήν ίστορία αὐτή τήν ὥρα, μιάν άναγεννητικήν άξία, που άν και σύγκαιρα σπρωγμένη στη συνείδηση του πλήθους άπ’ τήν άμεσην άνάγκη, ύποβασταζόμενη όμως στην έφαρμογή της και διαφώτισή της άπ’ τήν ύψηλή και γενικήν άρχή όπου περιέχει, εἶναι από τές πρωτες, χωρίς άλλο, που στη θύελλα

*bility* strive each on his own ground and on behalf of all to receive its great abundance; *no longer as if the causes of their rise or fall diverged deep within them*, but that all converge and become one *in their deepest ethical resilience*. Up until today, the moments when the nations came together as one or concentrated the problem of their lives within themselves were rare and almost always forced by a transitory defence or stiflingly localized in various points of the world.

Let us seize upon the present moment when freedom is gaining an unexpectedly broader definition for all men, and its atmosphere in the consciousness of the few has been shown up luminously immediate, universal and supremely ethical. The life of peoples can no longer be the *brutal fact* to which the Policy of so many centuries sought to confine it. The Balkan Idea represents for history in the present hour a regenerative value which, while it may have been thrust into the consciousness of the mass by immediate necessity, is nevertheless supported in its application and enlightenment by the lofty general principle it includes, and without doubt constitutes one of the prime regenerative values equal to the task of keeping Greece vigilant at the helm amid the tempestuous cross-currents of our time.

The elect who have initiated its

τῶν συγχρόνων μας ρευμάτων, εἶν' ἀντάξια νὰ κρατήσῃ ἀγρυπνισμένη στοὶ τιμόνι τὴν Ἑλλάδα. Οἱ ἐκλεκτοὶ ὁποῦ ἀνακίνησαν τὴν ἔρευνά της, μοῦ ἐμπνέουν τὴν πρὸ βαθιὰν ἐμπιστοσύνη, γιὰ τὴν ἀξίαν ὁποῦ μέλλεται φρουρά της. Προκειμένου, στήν κανονικὴ συνεργασία μου, ποῦ ἀρχίζει ἀπὸ τοῦτο τὸ φυλλάδιο, ν' ἀναπτύξω σὰν ἔρθ' ἡ ὥρα, τίς ἀπόψεις ποῦ τὸ πλάτος τῆς ἐρεύνης μοῦ ἐπιβάλλει, περιορίζομαι μονάχα στές γραμμές αὐτές μου, νὰ τονίσω τὴν ἀνώτατη ἠθικὴ χαρά μου καὶ συγχρόνως νὰ δηλώσω, ὡς ἀπλὴ καὶ στοιχειώδη ἀτομικὴ ὑποχρέωσή μου, πῶς σὲ τοῦτο τὸν ἀγῶνα, εἶμαι ταγμένος «Φύσει καὶ θελήσει», ὁλοσχερῶς<sup>1</sup>.

ΑΓΓΕΛΟΣ ΣΙΚΕΛΙΑΝΟΣ

investigation inspire in me the deepest confidence in the worthiness of its future custodians. With this issue begins my regular collaboration; since the hour has arrived, during its course I will develop the views which the breadth of the investigation imposes upon me. In these few lines I confine myself to stressing my supreme moral joy and declare, as my simple and elementary individual obligation, that for this contest I am committed and ready «in nature and will», completely.

ANGELOS SIKELIANOS

The ensuing issues of *Νέα Πολιτική* were increasingly censored, though generally not because of the Balkan discussion, and the journal was eventually banned altogether after 15 September 1923. It reappeared briefly in June/July 1924, and a second series was inaugurated in 1937 with Ioannis Tournakis as director and an undisguised pro-Metaxas editorial policy; it finally closed down with Greece's entry into the war in 1940. In 1938 Sikelianos' «Ὁμιλίες μου στοὺς Ἀρίστους» and some of Kostas Tournakis' articles from the 1923/24 period were republished<sup>2</sup>, but not Sikelianos' response to the Balkan Idea. G. Katsimbalis' invaluable bibliography<sup>3</sup> on Angelos Sikelianos overlooks this latter item entirely: chronologically it should precede entry No. 209, or preferably be included in it.

Nothing very much came of the discussion in *Νέα Πολιτική*. Initially the Idea took the form of a Balkan common market or federation of States<sup>4</sup>;

1. *Νέα Πολιτική* 12 (1 July 1923), p. 266.

2. *Νέα Πολιτική* Β', 2 (1938), pp. 562-568, 665-671 & 777-784; pp. 857-864 etc.

3. G. K. Katsimbalis, *Βιβλιογραφία Α. Σικελιανού (Συμπλήρωμα)*, Athens 1952.

4. See Nos. 10 and 11 (1923).

most of those who contributed rendered little more than lip service to the notion<sup>1</sup>, while others threw cold water on it as being impractical and unrealistic<sup>2</sup>. As the title of Sikelianos' «Talks» suggests, they were not specifically written for the journal or the *Balkan Idea*, and indeed there is no mention of the Balkans to be found in them at all<sup>3</sup>. The poet in fact turned all his attention to his Delphic Idea, which he felt to be hierarchically prior to, and hence more embracing than, the *Balkan Idea*.

Though his lyrical spirit sometimes expressed itself extravagantly in the letter republished above, the force and energy of his thought is compelling; and although fifty years of political changes have intervened since his advocacy of the *Balkan Idea*, I would suggest that recent trends in this part of the world—perhaps even the tragic developments in Cyprus—have tended to confirm his analysis and interpretation than to render them obsolete. One can only speculate about the possible effects that implementation of the *Balkan Idea* might have had upon the course of the Second World War and its aftermath in Greece. More on the domestic side, I should be very surprised indeed if the movement of 1923 could not claim some degree of spiritual paternity with regard to the Institute for *Balkan Studies*.

*Thessaloniki 1974*

1. See No. 15 (1923).

2. See Nos. 18, 19 (1924).

3. Cf. note 3, page 118.